DRAFT VERSION
PLEASE DO NOT CITE WITHOUT PERMISSION

**The Hunt for Red Flags:
Human Resource Perspectives on Internet-based Job Candidate Screening**

Steve McDonald, North Carolina State University

Amanda K. Damarin, Georgia Perimeter College

Hannah McQueen, North Carolina State University

Kim S. Holland, North Carolina State University

Abstract

This study uses qualitative interviews with 31 human resource professionals to examine how they weigh the usefulness as well as the discriminatory potential of evaluating job candidates based on information obtained from the Internet. Results show that most HR professionals value social media and online search data, though some question its accuracy and usefulness. The majority recognize that because online information emphasizes personal and ascribed traits, it can potentially result in hiring discrimination. They use four strategies to cope with this discriminatory potential. Two strategies downplay the importance of online information by constructing it as the responsibility of individual job candidates and its role in hiring as marginal. Two other tactics involve guarding against discrimination, but in individualized and rather passive and post-hoc ways. Findings contribute to our knowledge of the organizational and labor market dynamics that contribute to inequality in the face of exogenous technological change and field-level uncertainty.

*This study is supported by the American Sociological Association's Fund for the Advancement of the Discipline and by a grant from North Carolina State University's College of Humanities and Social Sciences. We are grateful for research assistance provided by Michael Fox. Correspondence should be directed to Steve McDonald (steve_mcdonald@ncsu.edu).

The Hunt for Red Flags: Human Resource Perspectives on Internet-based Job Candidate Screening

The question of how inequality in work and employment is affected by technological change remains hotly contested, particularly in the context of new information and communication technologies (ICTs) such as the Internet. In this debate, the lion's share of attention has focused on the impact of new technology on intra-organizational production processes, divisions of labor, and job skills, and on the consequences for aggregate inequalities between low and high-wage workers. Much less attention has been paid to the questions of how new technology affects extra-organizational employment processes such as labor market transactions, or to its impact on ascriptive inequalities such as those of race, gender, or age.

These gaps are surprising given that over the last twenty years the Internet has profoundly re-shaped the hiring processes in industrialized economies. Newspaper help-wanted ads have been replaced by general advertising websites like Craigslist and specialized job- and resume-search engines such as Monster.com or Indeed.com. Online search tools like Google and the professional networking site LinkedIn have allowed detailed candidate sourcing and background research to be conducted for larger numbers of positions extending much further down organizational ladders. The augmented informational access afforded by the Internet may help level ascriptive employment inequalities by allowing minorities, women, and other historically disadvantaged workers to display their qualifications accurately and to compete directly for jobs without having to navigate "old boy's networks." However, others caution that Internet applications reveal once-obscure information about job candidates' personal traits, which may reinforce employment inequality by making discrimination easier and cheaper than ever before.

The potential consequences of the Internet-enabled labor market present a dilemma for employers. On one hand, online information can be a valuable tool for making good employment

matches, which should benefit employers through increased labor productivity and reduced turnover costs. On the other, use of this information can also put them at risk of discriminating against qualified job applicants. We examine how HR professionals perceive, use, and justify using online tools in recruiting and screening job candidates, despite their potential to produce discriminatory outcomes.

Technological Change, Labor Markets, and Employment Inequality

Research on technological change and economic inequality is well-trodden territory in the social sciences. Classic theories of rationalization predict that technology-led de-skilling should reduce the rewards of most kinds of labor (e.g., Braverman 1974; Head 2003). The skill-biased technological change thesis posits that organizational adoption of ICTs brings greater economic returns to highly skilled workers than to their less-skilled counterparts (e.g., Bauer and Bender 2004; Fernandez 2001). Other approaches see the outcomes of technological change as contingent on jurisdictional negotiation between different worker groups (e.g., Vallas 2001; Zetka 2001). These approaches are united by an emphasis on intra-organizational processes in which firms adopt new technology and on the consequences of these dynamics for the re-distribution of economic rewards.

Our approach is unique in that we examine responses to exogenous technological change in the form of Internet-based labor market intermediaries—or social media sites, search engines, and other online tools which “interpose themselves between workers and firms to facilitate, inform, or regulate how workers are matched to firms” (Autor 2009:1). While clearly transformational, the implications of the expanded use of these tools for inequality remain contested. Some scholars have argued that Internet intermediaries confer advantages to both

sides of the labor market: by making information about jobs, employers, and job-candidates widely available, they lower search costs, reduce information asymmetries, and enable better employment matches (Autor 2001, 2009; Clark and Roberts 2010; Fountain 2005; Freeman 2002). Accordingly, several studies show that workers who use the Internet have better employment outcomes than those who do not, and that Internet-based job search is both common and beneficial in that it leads to faster and better employment (e.g., DiMaggio and Bonikowski 2008; Fountain 2005; Kuhn and Skuterud 2004; McDonald and Crew 2006; Suvankulov, Chi Keung Lau, and Ho Chi Chau 2012). Such findings are consistent with the argument that the Internet-enabled labor market helps level ascriptive inequalities by breaking down barriers to employment faced by disadvantaged groups (Freeman 2002).

However, the reverse could also be true: the Internet-based labor market could exacerbate employment inequalities. Internet intermediaries make worker skills more easily identifiable and therefore may encourage employers to converge in pursuit the most highly accomplished individuals, leading to “winner take all” labor markets (Autor 2001). In addition, by making information about job candidates’ personal characteristics and lives readily available, the Internet may also encourage hiring based on ascriptive categories and other non-job-relevant criteria (Blommaert, Coenders, and Tubergen 2014; Davison, Maraist, and Bing 2011; Duggan et al. 2014; Gaddis 2015). Access to these forms of data allows bias—conscious or unconscious—to influence employers’ hiring decisions (Caers and Castelyns 2011; Ruggs, Speights, and Walker 2013), potentially harming job candidates in disadvantageous ascriptive categories and/or with marginalized forms of cultural capital (cf., Rivera 2012). Further, at present neither the legal world nor formal organizational policies offer much in the way of decisive guidance on the use of online information in hiring (Clark and Roberts 2010; Davison et al. 2011).

The increasing availability of Internet-based labor market intermediaries therefore provides an opportunity for hiring authorities to “thicken” information about job candidates, but also to discriminate against workers based on ascriptive and cultural characteristics. How do organizational actors perceive and use this technological innovation and what are the consequences for economic inequality? In contrast to the more deterministic approaches to the technology-inequality debate (e.g., de-skilling, upskilling, and skill-biased technological change arguments), we assume that technological change does not have a uniform effect on inequality, but rather that the responses to innovation are rooted in and contingent on organizational dynamics (Granovetter and Tilly 1988).

As such, we draw from relational inequality theory, which focuses on the micro-level interactions, relationships, and status dynamics of particular organizational contexts (Avent-Holt and Tomaskovic-Devey 2014; Roscigno and Wilson 2014; Vallas and Cummins 2014). Embedded in these contexts are unique constructions of discriminatory action, each involving different assumptions about the types of actions that constitute discrimination, the types of individuals or groups that can commit or experience it, the proximate causes of discriminatory actions, and the tools, resources, and opportunities used to commit and respond to such actions (Hirsh 2014). Hirsh (2014) proposes a “context-oriented” model in which discrimination results from the entirety of workplace relations, including “systems of vulnerability and privilege, managerial discretion, norms and expectations of behavior, relational dynamics, compositional asymmetries, and restricted opportunity structures” (p. 269).

Technological change can disrupt established patterns of workplace interaction and claims-making, transforming and sometimes reproducing existing inequalities. Barley (1986) revealed how technological change impacted the institutionalized interaction scripts that define

organizational actors' roles and relative statuses in various workday encounters. Vallas' (2001) research on paper mills showed how technological change shifted perceptions about the types of knowledge that were most valuable to everyday plant operations, leading to a complex series of interactions that ultimately increased inequalities between engineers and manual workers. Other research has shown how decisions to adopt and/or reject new technology result from everyday working relations and larger power struggles between different and unequal occupational groups (Novek 2002) and also transform these relations and struggles, sometimes with significant long-term consequences for the occupations involved (Zetka 2001).

An understanding of the potential inequality consequences of exogenous technological change therefore requires attention to organizational actors' perceptions of these innovations, their use of these innovations, and the relational dynamics that shape (and are shaped by) these perceptions and actions. To facilitate this understanding, we examine how HR professionals interpret and construct this potentially problematic information, as well as their procedures and justifications for using or avoiding it.

Data and Methodology

The data analysis is based on 31 qualitative interviews with human resource professionals conducted from April to October 2014 in the Research Triangle of North Carolina (Raleigh, Durham, and Chapel Hill). Interviewees were recruited through attendance of HR professional meetings, events, and functions, supplemented with respondent suggested referrals. Interviewees were eligible to participate if they had ever engaged in recruitment and screening practices. The semi-structured interviews centered on applicant recruitment and screening and averaged 1 hour and 8 minutes. The interviews were audio recorded (in all but one instance) and transcribed,

resulting in nearly 800 pages of text. Observational notes from over two dozen HR activities that the researchers attended provided supplemental evidence.

Data collection and analysis proceeded reflexively using a grounded theory approach. Initial interviews led to a more focused set of inquiries. Open coding procedures were used to assign elements of the text data to categories. Then a focused coding stage examined the various themes and connections among the codes. Analytic memos highlighted the emergent themes, which were explored in greater detail through additional data collection. Data collection ceased upon theoretical saturation.

We emphasize the subjective experiences of the interviewees and make no claims to generalizability of those experiences. However, theoretical sampling strategies were employed to enhance sample heterogeneity. The final sample includes HR professionals in a variety of organizational forms, including individuals representing each the following categories: non-profit organizations, large private corporations, small/medium private corporations, private staffing agencies, and colleges/universities. The sample also represents a broad range of industries (e.g., real estate, law, finance, health care, engineering, manufacturing, and private services). Respondents served as recruiters for part time and full time jobs; temporary, permanent, and “temp-to-perm” jobs; low, middle, and high wage jobs. The results discuss prominent themes that emerged from the interviews. All names are pseudonyms.

Searching for Red Flags

Study participants were asked how they used social media and other Internet-based information to search for and screen job candidates. The vast majority reported looking at some form of online information. Online applicant screening frequently included reviewing

information about candidates found on social media websites such as LinkedIn and Facebook. HR staff would also enter names into Google searches in order to “see what’s out there on them,” according to Rick, an HR recruiting supervisor at a private university.

Red Flags and Red Cups

Rationales for using online content in the screening process varied. Most interviewees indicated that online information offered an opportunity to identify “red flags” – aspects of applicants’ lives that might be grounds for removing them from consideration for jobs. Red flags could pertain to any number of candidate qualities, but “judgment” was mentioned frequently.

Donna, a contract-based consultant with fifteen years of recruiting experience, explained:

Donna: There’s one person I have in my head and I cannot get this out of my head. This was a young man, um, great résumé, articulate, bright – several people wanted him. And, on his Facebook page, he had pictures of a girl laying down and he was licking beer off her stomach. ... But, you know—how do—[laughs] I have to question that person’s judgment.

This comment illustrates the strong impact that photographs have on perceptions of job candidates. The quintessential red flag seems to be the “red cup” photo, in which a job candidate is seen at a party holding a red Solo-brand cup, which is implicitly assumed to contain an alcoholic beverage. Such photos frequently appear on personal social media profiles (i.e., on Facebook rather than the more professional LinkedIn) and have little to do with the workplace. Nonetheless, they caused screeners to question candidates’ on-the-job behavior. Thus, Donna elaborated on her above comment, asking “if this is what he or she is doing on weekends, again, what are they going to do in front my client?”

Other interviewees seemed less concerned about the behavior captured in photos than by the fact that the job candidate allowed them to be seen online. Margaret, a veteran recruiter for a

financial services staffing firm, explained, “I don’t think I would want to hire a senior accountant who was putting stupid stuff on their Facebook page. You know, I think it’s a matter of maturity and judgment.”

In sum, interviewees saw online photos depicting alcohol, sexuality, or obscenity as indicators of candidates’ youth, immaturity, stupidity, and generally poor judgment. Photos were the most common source of red flags, but not the only ones: some HR professionals also scoured online postings for evidence that candidates had “bad-mouthed” their employers. This was taken as evidence that they were “troublemakers,” whose employment might lead to problematic client interactions or even litigation in the future. Whether visual or verbal, “red flags” were powerful enough to counteract the positive qualities that might appear on candidate profiles and resumes.

Professionalism Online

The individuals in our sample also reported searching online content for favorable candidate qualities, notably “professionalism.” The primary indicator of professionalism, however, was an absence of red flags. This was revealed in interviewees’ comments on how they managed their own online profiles. For instance, Betty, a young staffing agency recruiter, said:

Betty: I don’t post anything on my Facebook, hardly, unless it’s like a cute picture, like my dog or something, but I don’t blow it up with pictures of going to the beach and drinking—even if it’s innocent, people do it. I just don’t put it on there. If I’ve had a bad day, I don’t put it on there. And, another thing we look at on Facebook is if they bad mouth their employers, employees, their workplace, their clients, what kind of mouth they have on them. The grammar that they use. I mean, even though it’s Facebook, it’s a little informal, but for me, I would never misspell a word on Facebook or anything of that nature.

Well-versed in the types of red flags that recruiters look for, Betty exercises extreme caution, restraint, and self-censorship in her online postings, avoiding even misspellings so as to maintain

a professional image. Her comment implies that *all* real professionals should and perhaps do engage in similarly meticulous monitoring of their social media engagement.

In addition to a lack of red flags, interviewees also saw professionalism in online evidence of “fit” between a candidate’s personality or interests and the professional culture of the employer organization. Mary, who had nearly thirty years of HR experience, discussed at length how she used online information to find candidates that fit her employer’s culture.

Mary: I don’t want to bring somebody in who is going to make our environment not a professional environment because of some of their outside craziness. ... I kind of look and you kind of have a feel, is that our type of person? Do they volunteer for any charitable groups? You know, is that important to them? If it is, usually it’s on their Facebook. You know, and we’re really big on philanthropy, so I like to see things like that. ... Yeah, we’re very family-oriented. We like to see people—not that they have to, you know, be married to be here or whatever, but you know, if they’ve got pictures of them with their mom and dad or you know, “here is [sic] my siblings at Christmas.” Or, “here we’re at my brother’s wedding.” ... you just kind of get a feel, okay, that they’re the stablsh type of person that we like.

Here professionalism is contrasted with “craziness” but linked to volunteering and philanthropy, on one hand, and family orientation and stability, on the other. That this version of professionalism might differ from others is suggested by Mary’s emphasis on finding candidates who are “our type of person.” It is also evident in the varied qualities that other interviewees associated with fit. Many assessed fit, or the lack thereof, using physical characteristics and self-presentation styles revealed in photos, as in the following comment from Sharon (an early career recruiter in a non-profit organization):

Sharon: Like there was someone one time that, um, the way they were dressed, it was um, I don’t want to say Goth, because that’s probably not the right word. But it was just a little more dark, so he [the hiring manager] kind of asked more not of, “Why are you dressed that way,” – it was more like, “Well I noticed that it was that and we actually do a lot of volunteering and have a lot of things, you know, reaching out for the community, you know, is that something that is uncomfortable for you” or “what’s your vision as far as volunteering and that kind of way?” It was still somebody who was hired, because it was actually a Halloween costume that they had put as their profile picture. But, it’s just a way to make sure that when people are coming in here that they’re going to fit culturally.

Photos could also be used to infer personality characteristics such as being “down to earth,” as in the following comment from Betty:

Betty: If you see them going on hikes and they’re camping, something like that and they just seem kind of down to earth, um—you can see how they look. . . . I try to find out who they are and their presence on social media and the Internet itself. So, they get – sometimes they don’t even get an opportunity to make that first impression because they’ve already made one with their presence with social media.

In addition to conveying Betty’s sense of how to gauge a candidate’s fit with her organization, this quote also reveals another very important aspect of online screening – it precedes, and frequently precludes, any opportunity for job candidates to present themselves in person at a face-to-face meeting with their prospective employers.

A final aspect of professionalism identified by our interviewees was the accuracy of the candidate’s application material, as indicated by its consistency with information found online. The professional social media site LinkedIn was often used to gauge this. According to our respondents, consistency indicates honesty, while inconsistency shows that an applicant is not being “genuine.”

Online Information Skeptics

Despite these perceived benefits, respondents varied in their enthusiasm for online applicant screening. The top concern about this practice, by far, was that information obtained from social media and Google searches could easily lead to misperceptions about job applicants. Sarah, a recruiter at a small private college, noted that misperceptions could arise from “red cup” photos. She claimed that while it is easy to assume that the people in these pictures are drinking alcohol, that may not actually be the case; nonetheless, the assumption could negatively impact

their chances of being hired. Later in the interview, Sarah drew from her own personal experiences and concerns to illustrate the problems of deceptive online content. A friend had “tagged” her on a Facebook photo from a party she had not even attended; she was so afraid that potential employers might see it and perceive her as a heavy drinker that she asked to be untagged. Sarah punctuated her story by saying, “A picture is worth a thousand words, but it still might not be the whole picture.” This comment speaks to how a single picture found online might provide a vivid depiction of character and behavioral traits that are seen as highly salient by potential employers, and yet omit vital contextual information that proves the depiction false.

In addition to doubting the veracity of online information about job candidates, some HR professionals also questioned its relevance. Joe, a HR supervisor at a large public university, claimed that online data did not and should not play a role in hiring at his institution. He felt that candidate evaluation should focus entirely on job-relevant skills, which were not usefully assessed with information gleaned online, especially from social media such as Facebook:

Joe: If I were hiring someone to work around my house, I wouldn’t check their Facebook page or anything there either. ... I would rely primarily on my evaluation of the work that they’re going to be doing as well as the references they provide. So, my personal opinion, I don’t find it to be all that helpful. ... It would be irrelevant for the most part.

However, his caveat at the end of the quotation (“for the most part”) suggests that this principle might not always apply. He went on to admit: “Could I personally see a reason that you might want to check it? I can understand why people would want to check it.”

A few others claimed that collecting online information is unnecessary. For example, Patricia, a recruiter at a large private medical company, chose not to use online information sources because she trusted her employer’s established offline screening practices. She said, “During that whole process, I think we vet them pretty well, but it shouldn’t matter what they

have out there [online],” indicating that standard background checking procedures were sufficient to identify job-related red flags.

Discrimination Concerns

Skepticism about veracity and usefulness was a minority view; most of our interviewees valued online information highly. However, the majority also recognized the potential for online applicant screening to lead to discrimination. Rick, a white middle age HR supervisor at a private university, articulated this concern most fully:

Rick: It opens it up to a lot of different discrimination and a lot of different, you know, just prejudices that you may not think of right off the bat. But you know, you Google the top three candidates from the pool of, you know, résumés that you’ve got—you’ve interviewed these three people and then you Google them and you said, well I don’t know, they all look fine to me, but kind of subconsciously, I don’t know, that person is black or that person is old or that person is whatever and then all the sudden, maybe they’ve just dropped off your list. ... There’s conscious prejudices that you’ll have and then there’s also just subconscious prejudices. ... So, I mean, that’s a major pitfall of having all that information out there. Whereas before, you know—it used to be that people would attach their pictures to their résumé. Then that all stopped because you know, there was a million different ways of discrimination. Well now, not only is your—your picture is not attached to your résumé, but your whole life is basically attached to your résumé on Google.

Rick’s statement shows awareness of the conscious and subconscious ways that information about race, age, and other characteristics can influence hiring decisions, as well as concern that the increased access to such information afforded by the Internet makes discrimination easier and more likely than it used to be when employers could only rely on résumés. The fact that he and other HR professionals are aware of this downside of online applicant screening is not surprising. Human resource departments are required to deal with discrimination complaints and litigation, and that HR professionals undergo certification testing that requires knowledge of Equal Employment Opportunity laws. The workshops and training sessions they attend in order to

maintain their certifications also frequently center on issues of hiring and workforce diversification. Therefore, they are more likely than other organizational actors to be sensitive to potentially discriminatory hiring practices.

Dealing with Discriminatory Potential

Despite awareness of the discriminatory potential of online candidate screening, few safeguards were put into place to protect organizations from this outcome. Below we describe four main strategies that they used to cope with the discriminatory potential of online information.

Calls for Responsible Profile Management

The first strategy was one of individualization, which involved constructing the problem of discrimination in online screening as one that individual job candidates must deal with on their own, through careful management of their online profiles. Broadly speaking, close monitoring of online information about oneself was seen as a matter of personal responsibility.

Linda offered advice for how to do this:

Linda: I think that people need to be more diligent about their—about their personal information. You know, and remember that times have changed and everything is, you know, is open to the public now. So, you know, they need to—you know, use the controls that are in place to protect themselves. So, that would be—especially young people, I see a lot of college students and you know, posting things that I just don't think they're thinking about.

... [Make] sure they have a good LinkedIn profile, even when it comes down to—get someone to take a good picture of you. Go, you know, pay the money to have a good picture. Have it, you know, Photoshopped, you know, do something to make it look professional. Um. I think that's really important.

According to Linda (a white female generalist from a non-profit organization), management of a person's online presence requires diligence and caution. People need to be aware that online

information about themselves is available to the public and that employers will use this information in making hiring decisions. They need to protect themselves by using privacy settings to restrict access to their information and by avoiding the urge to post things they might not want employers to see. Further, management of online information is not merely defensive: Linda spoke to the necessity of taking a proactive approach to building a positive online identity. She and others discussed these identities as personal brands that require careful and constant management. Overall, she equated failure to take such steps with youth, immaturity, and lack of forethought.

Patricia also spoke to this issue in her interview, listing the sorts of online information that might invite negative judgments from employers:

Patricia: If you're looking for work, you really shouldn't be posting stuff about your political, religious, personal, you know, drinking, drugs, anything about that. You shouldn't—just don't post anything. [laughs] If you're looking for work, just don't post anything.

Implying that postings about political, religious, and personal views could be just as damaging as evidence of drinking and drug use, Patricia concluded with a laugh that it is best to not to post anything online at all. However, this advice is difficult to follow for individuals whose visible personal characteristics may subject them to bias. Asked whether she thought the use of online information in applicant screening could result in discrimination, Barbara replied:

Barbara: Being an African-American female, I think so. ... Um. I haven't experienced it, but you don't know. You know, and so, it was a thought when I—because I'm applying for a position ... it did cross my mind. "Would they want someone that looks like me?" I do have an HR manager—a friend that's an HR manager and she's looking for work in [city] and she took her picture off of LinkedIn. She doesn't have her picture. So, I do know a lot of people that do that. ... I did make the decision to [put a picture of myself on LinkedIn]. I do question my decision, I don't know if it was the right thing to do or not. So, most people—a lot of people think, "You know, maybe I should wait until I'm in front of them, so they don't make any um, judgments or decisions based on race or age."

Barbara, who was looking for work at the time of her interview due to an impending layoff, faced the dilemma of whether or not to present an image of herself online, knowing that it could be used to discriminate against her based on gender, race, or age. While she opted to do so, she claimed to have friends who did not post pictures on LinkedIn. What is striking is how Barbara framed this as a personal decision, about which she feels concern and uncertainty. In doing so, she seemingly made herself—and not her potential employers—responsible for any discrimination she might face as a result.

The dilemma faced by Barbara and others is complicated by the fact that the lack of a professional picture online can be seen as its own “red flag.” Donna, a white female private HR consultant with 15 years of recruiting experience, said that when she comes across potential applicants without pictures on their LinkedIn profiles, it leads her to question their suitability for employment.

Donna: You know, the photograph is very telling. The fact that people don't have a photograph tells me something. ... I wonder why. I wonder why. Why can't you—I mean, you have everything else up there. ... Why can't you put a snapshot of yourself? Are you afraid of discrimination? Do you not have a professional look about you? Are you—I just wonder why? Why would you not? If you're going to go to the trouble of putting a profile together, why don't you put a snapshot there, because that's the first thing that somebody's going to look at.

Donna considered a missing photograph on a LinkedIn profile to be an indicator that the person has something to hide. She recognized that potential discrimination is one reason for this omission, but the person might also be attempting to hide visual characteristics that fail to convey “a professional look.” Donna is vexed by such a decision. Her claim that “you have everything else up there” seems to imply that photographs are just one more information source and would merely overlap with the text of a LinkedIn profile. She also saw posting a photo as a relatively easy and important step to take. The fact that a picture is “the first thing that

somebody's going to look at" was offered as an argument for why anyone would want to post a snapshot as a matter of course. And yet this was precisely the reason that Barbara and others subject to gender, race, or age discrimination were reluctant to include pictures on their profiles.

In sum, HR professionals constructed the management of online personal information as the duty of individual job candidates; those who failed to perform this duty correctly were responsible for any negative employer judgments they might face as a result. One important, if implicit, corollary of this idea is that those performing online screening need not worry about their own potential bias, as bias is something which job candidates bring upon themselves. Another is that the problem of discrimination based on online information is an individual matter, requiring an individual rather than an institutional response.

Discounting the Importance of Online Applicant Screening

Another rhetorical strategy for dealing with the discriminatory potential of online screening is to claim that the practice is rare or that it only plays a minor role in the hiring process. Such claims were made even though our interviewees were aware of online screening and the majority considered it to be quite widespread. This apparent contradiction was managed in several ways. First, some HR professionals appeared hesitant to admit to using online searches and claimed to do so only in very circumscribed ways or circumstances. This can be seen, for instance, in comments from Kimberly, who was unemployed at the time of the interview but had six years of experience as an HR generalist:

Kimberly: I don't tend to do that. I—you know, I tend to be somewhat careful about what's posted to my Facebook profile just in general. Um. As far as, you know, type of pictures or whatever, but I don't—I've never—I have looked at people—like, looked for people's online profile in a couple of cases where [pause] either they had good qualifications but there were questions about whether they'd be a cultural or personality fit for the team, or when they really didn't have a work history, like if you've got

someone fresh out of college, then their résumé is really sparse and maybe this could tell me more about, you know, honestly how mature they are as a potential employee.

Kimberly's initial claim was that she did not engage in online applicant screening. However, she eventually amended her stance, allowing that there have been times when she has looked at online profiles to better determine applicant fit. In particular, Kimberly turned to online screening when applicant information was sparse or ambiguous, or when online indicators of applicant culture, personality, or maturity might be weighed against deficits in more traditional forms of human capital.

Other HR recruiters claimed to limit their online screening by relying only on professional sources of information. LinkedIn was consistently viewed as a legitimate social media platform to examine when evaluating job candidates because of its "professional" content, whereas Facebook and other social media were often considered to be "personal" and hence unacceptable information sources. Robert, who recruited administrative personnel for a large public university, explained this distinction:

Robert: The only thing I use is LinkedIn because that's really a professional site where people are only putting information about their careers. Facebook is more of ... somebody's dog and their picture in the backyard, you know, at some party—I don't even look at them. I don't even have a Facebook account. So, there's no temptation for me to even do it.

Although Robert claimed to rely only on the professional LinkedIn, it is notable that he described looking at Facebook as a temptation, suggesting that he and perhaps others might really want to view information from this source as well.

Other interviewees claimed to limit their online screening activities to particular steps in the hiring process. For instance Charles, a near-retirement HR generalist for a non-profit organization, explained that he only used online information in the final stages of evaluation:

Charles: So what you get to is you've waded through, you're down to the last one, two, three candidates, and you're doing reference checks and you're trying to make sure that there are no red flags, and that presents its own set of challenges of course, and then you might look on Facebook. ... But truth be told is, for this level of work, by the time you're down to that last candidate and starting to check references, the Facebook page is almost irrelevant.

Charles' comment suggests initial impressions of job candidates are based on applicant-submitted materials and professional documents alone, without consideration of personal or social characteristics; Facebook data are only used as a final check for red flags. He also implies that by the time Facebook data are considered, they are unlikely to change hiring decisions which have already been made.

Finally, some respondents did not claim to limit their viewing of online data, but instead stated that its importance in evaluating candidates for jobs was marginal. Brian is a white male in his mid-thirties and works as a recruiter for a staffing agency. When asked about how his company uses online information in applicant screening, he offered the following response.

Brian: That's something that we'll do—we don't even judge them on that. I mean, for—you know, I've had a beer at a party, so I'm not going to give them a hard time, no. If it's something real extreme, we'll probably take a second look at them, but we'll give them the benefit of the doubt and meet with them first. We won't make a judgment on photos. But, it tells us something about them. If it's a start-up and these people all look like they're very creative people on their Facebook, then that's a good thing. If they're drinking, it's not a bad thing either. And so, um—it really doesn't hurt them one way or the other for the most part.

Brian's response reflects the ambivalence with which online applicant screening is often viewed. His company looked at candidates' online data but also gave them "the benefit of the doubt." He said that the information "tells us something about them," but that it wouldn't be used as a basis for judgment and in the end has had no effect on hiring outcomes. Similar contradictions were expressed by Mary, an HR generalist in a medium-sized firm, who said: "You know, to me, I don't look for things that are going to disqualify people. I look for things that are going to

qualify them.” The imperceptibly ironic connotations underscore the virtue and vice of online applicant screening.

In these instances, HR professionals perceived online applicant screening to be simultaneously useful and useless, as well as operating as qualifier but not disqualifier. One implication of these statements is that if online screening is circumscribed and of ambiguous importance, its discriminatory potential is limited as well. As Brian put it, online information “really doesn’t hurt” people.

Personalized Principles for Avoiding Bias

While the above two strategies discount the discriminatory potential of online screening by constructing it as the candidate’s problem or as limited in impact, the next two strategies acknowledge that online data might lead to bias and offer methods of preventing the latter. The first of these is another strategy of individualization. Much like choices about what information to share online, decisions regarding the use of online information in applicant screening are generally considered to be matters of personal ethics and morality. Many HR professionals felt that they could use online information without discriminating because they were well-trained and capable of keeping personal biases out of the hiring process. For instance:

Mary: I say this very confidently. I don’t discriminate based on any of those factors [information obtained via social media or Google searches]. ... Um, you know, it’s—it comes down to the person who is doing the screening and hiring and their moral codes. I’m an SPHR certified person; I’ve signed on the dotted line. I’m not going to do that. And, so for me, I don’t.

Mary framed non-discrimination as a straightforward choice based on personal morals and professional certification. However, others portrayed a much murkier set of dilemmas. As shown in comments from Linda, this was often due to the uncertain legal status of online screening.

Linda: That's kind of a gray area, I think. You know, EEO [Equal Employment Opportunity Commission] basically requires that we're providing equal employment to all individuals without discriminating against certain protected groups. ... Well, if they are wearing really loud clothes and strange jewelry and we happen to come across it on a Facebook page, that's not protected by law. We might not like that style, but it—it would be difficult to use that, um—I mean, you could use it and it would be difficult for that person to be able to say, "I was discriminated against." ... If someone doesn't want to hire you because you're overweight, it's not protected. I mean, you can choose not to hire someone because they're overweight, that doesn't mean it's ethical. You know, because you're basing your decision on something that does not relate to the skills required to do the job.

This quotation highlights the lack of correspondence between illegal and unethical practices.

Legal protections cover a relatively circumscribed set of categories and the law offers virtually no guidance on how to deal with the wide variety of information about job applicants available via the Internet. Ethically, HR professionals feel bound to confine their evaluations to job skills only, which requires the exclusion of a broader set of data. The gray area of online applicant screening therefore resides in the middle – how can one evaluate information that is not illegal to consider but that might only be tangentially related to job performance?

With little legal guidance on how to deal with online information, HR professionals often make up the rules as they go based on previous experiences. Ruth, a late career HR generalist, relayed how an experience with highly religious prior employee led her to develop her online screening practices: "He was evangelizing. He was, you know, required them to pray before staff meetings, that kind of thing. There were people who did not appreciate it." Due to this experience, she now looks at religious conservatism when reviewing online content of applicants. Someone with a conservative religious background would not be disqualified from the process, but Ruth said she would "make a point to do some pretty targeted questioning in an interview, just to make sure."

HR professionals also rely on their training and a sense of fairness to fill in the gray area, but go about reducing bias in very different ways. Some interviewees claimed to avoid seeking or viewing applicant information online, while others claimed to use the materials but had varied methods for limiting their activities. “You have to be really cautious with it,” Helen explained. Ruth noted, “You have to have somebody with good judgment ... I mean, I personally feel like I could overlook things.” These comments show that HR professionals believe that online information has a strong potential to bias the screening process, but also that the tasks of overcoming bias and ensuring fairness are up to them as individuals. This strategy of individualization is in one sense an accurate depiction of the situation they face, given the lack of legal regulations and, in most cases, formal organizational policy concerning online screening. However, by taking individualization for granted, HR professionals make development of institutional solutions less likely and thus help perpetuate it.

Post-Hoc Interventions

The final strategy also involves guarding against bias, but in this case it centers on the biases of hiring managers, the other organizational actors most directly involved in candidate screening. Many of our interviewees expressed serious concern about online screening by hiring managers, who they saw as untrained and thoughtless. In most hiring processes we heard about, HR professionals are in charge of sourcing jobs (i.e., getting people to apply) and whittling down the list of applicants to a smaller set of interviewees. Hiring managers take over from there. When asked whether hiring managers search for candidate information on the Internet, Sophia said she was certain that they did. Although currently a mid-career unemployed generalist, she recalled “cringing” many times when hiring managers at previous jobs would either tell her or

show her information about candidates (such as photos) that they had found online, especially things that were irrelevant to job qualifications. Carol, a generalist working in the non-profit sector, offered an example of the differences in how HR professionals and hiring managers approach online applicant information:

Carol: There are people on our interview team, including my boss, that I think get stuck in some of the biases and stuff. I don't try to see men or women or any of that kind of stuff, or disability or whatever. It's like—maybe it's because I'm more trained in HR to think that way, you know? They expect that from me, but sometimes when we have our interview feedback meeting, I'm having to remind them. I'm like, "I don't really look at that."

Avoiding bias is a critical part of Carol's training and job assignment as an HR professional, but hiring managers have different set of motivations and experiences.

Despite the fact that many respondents shared this concern, formal attempts to address hiring managers' online screening practices were surprisingly scarce. When queried about whether HR staff discussed or did training with managers on the use of online information in applicant screening, Sharon's response was typical:

Sharon: Yeah. We don't address it yet, the materials. We might have to get there. It's a lot easier than before to Google things and look up everything on Facebook and find out information. Um. ... Maybe at some point it's going to be in the material.

The absence of training materials regarding online screening is surprising given the detailed attention paid to other aspects of the hiring process. HR professionals routinely provide standardized trainings that address, for example, which types of questions to ask interviewees and appropriate strategies for reference checking. But out of all of the organizations with which our interviewees were affiliated, only one was reported to include explicit information on the kinds of Internet data that could be used to evaluate job candidates as part of its standard training materials. Further, this organization stood out because it was a large public sector university that had recently been subject to (and passed) a federal audit of its hiring practices. Otherwise,

proactive strategies for dealing with this concern tended to be haphazard – such as in Ruth’s case. She summarized her approach in the following way: ‘I would just run across an article online or in a journal or whatever and just email it to all the manager staff and say, “Good information. Let me know if you want to talk about it.”’

Rather than relying on formal training, most HR professionals tended to deal with hiring managers’ questionable use of online materials informally and only after they heard about problematic instances. Respondents told numerous stories consistent with Helen’s experience:

Helen: What you’ll find is that you’ll learn that after the fact, that a lower level supervisor just took it upon themselves to Google somebody or to search Facebook or do whatever and didn’t like whatever they saw. And, as an HR person, you’re going like, “Ahhh!” [imitates screaming]

Typically, the next step in this sequence would involve a follow-up conversation with the supervisor to talk about why that activity is problematic. Many of the HR professionals described having such conversations with hiring managers and considered this sort of coaching or counseling to be a frequent part of their jobs. However, this post-hoc intervention strategy is problematic because it rests on HR staff hearing about troublesome online search episodes, which is likely to occur for only a fraction of the episodes that actually take place. In fact, HR professionals seem to have limited knowledge of how often hiring managers engage in online applicant screening. Some, like Sophia quoted above, assume that they do so often. Others, like Sandra (an African American female recruiter in a large private company), assume that managers do not engage in this practice because she does not hear from them: “If they were to find something like that, they’re definitely going to come to—to—you know, to us.”

Knowledge of a hiring manager’s online screening activities is even more opaque when HR professionals operate as third-party recruiters rather than in-house staff. In these instances especially, they rarely gain any knowledge of what hiring managers are doing. Brian explained

that he learned about and addressed these situations as they arose at the companies he worked on contracts with:

Brian: We work with companies that we trust to do the right interview process and we'll follow-up with the employee of, "What did you think of it," and they'll go tell us everything. So, that's kind of where we get our red flags, versus kind of coaching [hiring managers] beforehand on how to do it. ... Yeah. So, if there's not a problem or there hasn't been a problem in the past, we don't [ask].

Brian's post-hoc approach to dealing with hiring managers was similar to that of in-house HR staff. But interviews revealed that contracting arrangements erected further barriers to communication about applicant screening practices, in that staffing agencies were less likely to have these types of conversations with hiring managers and seemed less interested in doing so. An excellent example of this was provided by Nancy, a young white female staffing agency recruiter. When asked about whether she ever discussed online applicant screening with hiring managers at the companies her staffing agency contracts with, she responded, "No. I just assume that everybody does it."

Discussion and Conclusions

Like other technological innovations, the rise of the Internet has provided opportunities for new lines of claims-making about the distribution of organizational resources, and hence provided an occasion for the reconfiguration of inequalities in work and employment. In particular, the development of online labor market intermediaries—including social media sites, search engines, and others—has enabled new applicant screening practices that emphasize social, cultural, and ascriptive characteristics over job-relevant skills as hiring criteria. This qualitative investigation has examined how human resource professionals perceive and respond to this potential for discrimination. To begin with, HR professionals clearly recognize value in

information obtained via the Internet. This information can be used to thicken applicant data in a number of ways. First, information obtained via Google searches and social media can help identify “red flags” that signal problematic worker characteristics—largely personality flaws such as poor judgment, lack of forethought, and disingenuousness—that would not be apparent in application materials. Second, online applicant screening can reveal positive traits such as professionalism and “fit” with the culture of the employer organization. On the other hand, some HR professionals distrusted online information about job candidates, claiming that it could create misperceptions and questioning its relevance to the hiring process. Many also recognized that online applicant screening can lead to discriminatory hiring due to conscious and unconscious biases. Though our interviewees did not raise the issue explicitly, online screening is also problematic because it makes salient physical traits and cultural proclivities which may lead to selection based on recruiters’ own perceptions of ideal-typical employees, preferences for dominant social and cultural characteristics, and homosocial reproduction of existing workforce compositions (Kanter 1977; Rivera 2012).

Despite expressing concerns about online screening, HR professionals also downplayed its consequences. They treated the problem in an individualized way, pointing to the need for job seekers to proactively manage their online profiles so as to protect themselves from being disqualified due to a red flag. In doing so, they made discrimination the responsibility of job candidates, essentially blaming the potential victims. HR professionals also described their own efforts to avoid discrimination and bias as highly individualized tasks. Lacking legal constraints and organizational policies, they relied on their own moral and ethical codes, individual training, and personal experiences. Many HR professionals expressed confidence that these experiences allowed them to avoid bias. However, previous research suggests that sensitivity to

discrimination is not enough to prevent it and commitments to objectivity may backfire, unwittingly encouraging unconscious bias. For instance, Castilla and Benard (2010) revealed how firms' rhetorics of meritocracy paradoxically increase gender bias, leading managers to assign smaller bonuses to women than to similarly qualified men.

In addition to individualizing the problem of discrimination in online screening, HR professionals also discounted and avoided it. Discounting involved describing their use of online information as very circumscribed or otherwise marginal in importance to the hiring process—so that any resulting discrimination was, by association, perceived as inconsequential. It was with hiring managers that they practiced avoidance. Despite concerns about the managers' online screening practices, HR professionals lack a comprehensive, standardized, and/or proactive approach for addressing the situation. Hiring managers do not receive cautions about online screening or instruction in how to distinguish job-relevant from non-relevant online content in their otherwise extensive training on hiring procedures and practices. Instead, concerns about online screening were dealt with on an individual basis and only after incidents had occurred. This is consistent with existing research showing that HR staff tend to accept biased performance evaluations from managers without critical commentary (Castilla 2008), but problematic because studies have documented the impact of ascriptive biases on managers' performance evaluations of their subordinates (e.g., Castilla 2011; Elvira and Town 2001).

The only clear deviation from the post-hoc approach to dealing with problematic online applicant screening was found in a public university setting. This organization, which was subject to a legal audit of its hiring practices, was the only one to maintain a clear set of standardized materials that explicitly addressed online applicant screening strategies. The standardization of training materials is important given the varying interpretations of regulatory

requirements observed within organizations (Gray and Silbey 2014). This deviant case suggests that legal enforcement may help to facilitate the standardization of training materials to address this problem. This finding is consistent with previous research which reveals how legal enforcement helps to reduce discrimination and enhance workplace diversity initiatives (Hirsh and Kornrich 2008; Kalev, Dobbin, and Kelly 2006; Skaggs 2008). However, legal regulation of online screening activities is largely lacking at present. Further, the other demonstrably effective method of reducing discrimination is to make specific organizational actors responsible for change (Kalev, Dobbin, and Kelly 2006), but in the case of online employment screening, the strategies we have discussed—individualization, discounting, and avoidance—essentially create an organizational responsibility vacuum. Hence, we suspect that they are just as likely to encourage as to prevent discriminatory use of online information, and resulting inequalities.

While the present study is limited by a relatively small number of cases, it nonetheless offers a deeper understanding of the subjective experiences of HR professionals. Those experiences provide useful insights into the ways that organizational actors attempt to deal with changing technology and its implications for inequality in the face of field-level uncertainty. The results are therefore relevant not only to scholarly debates about relational inequality processes, but also policy debates about how to best reduce discrimination and increase organizational diversity. From a policy perspective, further research on why HR staff so rarely intervene in hiring managers' online screening and evaluation processes would be of interest. In addition, we need to better understand hiring managers' use of online applicant data and how they interpret and negotiate perceived concerns about discrimination from HR. With regards to the relational inequality perspective, this study's contributions could be usefully extended by further research on how organizational inequalities are shaped by procedural as well as allocative claims-making,

on how specific claims-making strategies such as individualization and discounting are used to cope with technological change, and more generally on the hiring process and other interactions that span organizational boundaries.

REFERENCES

- Autor, David. 2009. "Studies of Labor Market Intermediation: An Introduction." Pp. 1–23 in *Studies of labor market intermediation*, edited by D. H. Autor. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Autor, David H. 2001. "Wiring the Labor Market." *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 15(1):25–40.
- Avent-Holt, Dustin and Donald Tomaskovic-Devey. 2014. "A Relational Theory of Earnings Inequality." *American Behavioral Scientist* 58(3):379–99.
- Barley, Stephen R. 1986. "Technology as an Occasion for Structuring: Evidence from Observations of CT Scanners and the Social Order of Radiology Departments." *Administrative Science Quarterly* 31(1):78–108.
- Bauer, Thomas K. and Stefan Bender. 2004. "Technological Change, Organizational Change, and Job Turnover." *Labour Economics* 11(3):265–91.
- Blommaert, Lieselotte, Marcel Coenders, and Frank van Tubergen. 2014. "Discrimination of Arabic-Named Applicants in the Netherlands: An Internet-Based Field Experiment Examining Different Phases in Online Recruitment Procedures." *Social Forces* 92(3):957–82.
- Braverman, Harry. 1974. *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century*. NYU Press.
- Caers, Ralf and Vanessa Castelyns. 2011. "LinkedIn and Facebook in Belgium: The Influences and Biases of Social Network Sites in Recruitment and Selection Procedures." *Social Science Computer Review* 29(4):437–48.
- Castilla, Emilio J. 2008. "Gender, Race, and Meritocracy in Organizational Careers." *American Journal of Sociology* 113(6):1479–1526.
- Castilla, Emilio J. 2011. "Bringing Managers Back In Managerial Influences on Workplace Inequality." *American Sociological Review* 76(5):667–94.
- Castilla, Emilio J. and Stephen Benard. 2010. "The Paradox of Meritocracy in Organizations." *Administrative Science Quarterly* 55(4):543–676.
- Clark, Leigh A. and Sherry J. Roberts. 2010. "Employer's Use of Social Networking Sites: A Socially Irresponsible Practice." *Journal of Business Ethics* 95(4):507–25.
- Davison, H. Kristl, Catherine Maraist, and Mark N. Bing. 2011. "Friend or Foe? The Promise and Pitfalls of Using Social Networking Sites for HR Decisions." *Journal of Business and Psychology* 26(2):153–59.

- DiMaggio, Paul and Bart Bonikowski. 2008. "Make Money Surfing the Web? The Impact of Internet Use on the Earnings of U.S. Workers." *American Sociological Review* 73(2):227–50.
- Duggan, M., Nicole B. Ellison, Cliff Lampe, A. Lenhart, and M. Madden. 2014. *Social Media Update*. Pew Research Center. Retrieved May 4, 2015 (www.pewinternet.org/2015/01/09/social-media-update-2014/).
- Elvira, Marta and Robert Town. 2001. "The Effects of Race and Worker Productivity on Performance Evaluations." *Industrial Relations: A Journal of Economy and Society* 40(4):571–90.
- Fountain, Christine M. 2005. "Finding a Job in the Internet Age." *Social Forces* 83(3):1235–62.
- Freeman, R. B. 2002. "The Labour Market in the New Information Economy." *Oxford Review of Economic Policy* 18(3):288–305.
- Gaddis, S. Michael. 2015. "Discrimination in the Credential Society: An Audit Study of Race and College Selectivity in the Labor Market." *Social Forces* 93(4):1451–79.
- Granovetter, Mark and Charles Tilly. 1988. "Inequality and Labor Process." Pp. 175–221 in *Handbook of Sociology*, edited by N. J. Smelser. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Gray, Garry C. and Susan S. Silbey. 2014. "Governing Inside the Organization: Interpreting Regulation and Compliance." *American Journal of Sociology* 120(1):96–145.
- Head, Simon. 2003. *The New Ruthless Economy: Work & Power in the Digital Age*. Oxford University Press New York.
- Hirsh, C. Elizabeth. 2014. "Beyond Treatment and Impact A Context-Oriented Approach to Employment Discrimination." *American Behavioral Scientist* 58(2):256–73.
- Hirsh, C. Elizabeth and Sabino Kornrich. 2008. "The Context of Discrimination: Workplace Conditions, Institutional Environments, and Sex and Race Discrimination Charges." *American Journal of Sociology* 113(5):1394–1432.
- Kalev, Alexandra, Frank Dobbin, and Erin Kelly. 2006. "Best Practices or Best Guesses? Assessing the Efficacy of Corporate Affirmative Action and Diversity Policies." *American Sociological Review* 71(4):589–617.
- Kanter, Rosabeth Moss. 1977. *Men and Women of the Corporation*. Basic books.
- Kuhn, Peter and Mikal Skuterud. 2004. "Internet Job Search and Unemployment Durations." *American Economic Review* 94(1):218–32.
- McDonald, Steve and Robert E. Crew Jr. 2006. "Welfare to Web to Work: Internet Job Searching among Former Welfare Clients in Florida." *J. Soc. & Soc. Welfare* 33:239.

- Novek, J. 2002. "IT, Gender, and Professional Practice: Or, Why an Automated Drug Distribution System Was Sent back to the Manufacturer." *Science Technology & Human Values* 27(3):379–403.
- Rivera, Lauren A. 2012. "Hiring as Cultural Matching The Case of Elite Professional Service Firms." *American Sociological Review* 77(6):999–1022.
- Roscigno, Vincent J. and George Wilson. 2014. "The Relational Foundations of Inequality at Work I Status, Interaction, and Culture." *American Behavioral Scientist* 58(2):219–27.
- Ruggs, Enrica N., Sabrina Speights, and Sarah Singletary Walker. 2013. "Are You In or Out? Employment Discrimination in Online and Offline Networks." *Industrial and Organizational Psychology* 6(4):457–62.
- Skaggs, Sheryl. 2008. "Producing Change or Bagging Opportunity? The Effects of Discrimination Litigation on Women in Supermarket Management." *American Journal of Sociology* 113(4):1148–82.
- Suvankulov, Farrukh, Marco Chi Keung Lau, and Frankie Ho Chi Chau. 2012. "Job Search on the Internet and Its Outcome." *Internet Research* 22(3):298–317.
- Vallas, Steven and Emily Cummins. 2014. "Relational Models of Organizational Inequalities Emerging Approaches and Conceptual Dilemmas." *American Behavioral Scientist* 58(2):228–55.
- Vallas, Steven Peter. 2001. "Symbolic Boundaries and the New Division of Labor: Engineers, Workers and the Restructuring of Factory Life." *Research in Social Stratification and Mobility* 18:3–37.
- Zetka, James R. 2001. "Occupational Divisions of Labor and Their Technology Politics: The Case of Surgical Scopes and Gastrointestinal Medicine." *Social Forces* 79(4):1495–1520.